Senator [illegible]

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ILLEGIB SCHLESINGER'S KENNEDY

(By John M. Blum)

For Andrew Jackson, so we learned from Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., the sun broke through the clouds as he set out for his inauguration; for Franklin Roosevelt, the mist and wind under a sullen sky were witness to the Nation's applause for buoyant call to action; for John F. Kennedy, Schlesinger tells us now, "it all began in the cold," as so soon thereafter it was all so tragically to end. In "A Thousand Days," Schlesinger, as he did before for Jackson and for Roosevelt, brings his sure knowledge, his lucid prose, and his unmatched gift for understanding the endless adventure of governing men to the analysis of the administration of a great President. The book, Schlesinger says at the outset, is "not a comprehensive history of the Kennedy Presidency. It is a personal memoir." But the intensity of the author's personal experience with Kennedy does not, in spite of the disclaimer, diminish the range, the quality, and the authority of the history recorded. Schlesinger's is the first account of the Kennedy years to catch and convey the spirit and the style of the New Frontier and its leader. It will be for many years the account against which all others must be measured, and on which all others will in some degree depend.

Kennedy, as Schlesinger portrays him, served both as the agent and the symbol for an indispensable reformation of public policies as those policies were made and applied and understood at home and abroad. "Let us," the President said of the Alliance for Progress, as by implication he often said of his own country, "let us once again transform the American continent into a vast crucible of revolutionary ideas and efforts—a tribute to the power of the creative energies of free men and women—an example to all the world that liberty and progress walk hand in hand." The Kennedy whom Schlesinger reveals believed in those possibilities and dedicated himself to their fulfillment. He did so even though his political perceptions told him how perilously slow the course of progress had to be, and—more important—even though his reading of history and his consequent sense of irony reminded him always of the distance that lay between the noblest, most vigorous intentions and their invariably lesser products. That sense of irony contributed to Kennedy's humor, which he wryly turned against himself, without in the least reducing Kennedy's stamina, born partly of rare courage, partly of confidence, and essential to his imperturbability in crisis.

Irony has meaning only to man thinking, only to an intellectual, and Kennedy, as Schlesinger demonstrates, was the most incisive intellectual of the whole brilliant galaxy of men whom he summoned to his side. More than any one of them, he commanded the entire array of difficult subjects to which he adverted. Yet Kennedy, even in repose, exuded the poised grace of a man trained and resolved to act. His command of his mind—thorough in its instruction, jugular in its drive to the essence of a problem—whetted his impatience to be on with his tasks. The impulse to action, the swift concentration on the practicable, the mistrust of the rhetoric of idealism, the unhesitating recourse when circumstances so indicated to the power of the military or of the Irish Mafia—all these led some intellectuals, particularly those who did not know Kennedy, or who disagreed with him, to misread his high purpose and to underrate his arresting capabilities, to disown their closest kin to hold the Presidency since the time of Thomas Jefferson.

For his part, Kennedy was hurt and puzzled when intelligent but cloistered men in 1960 found him neither less nor more than Richard Nixon. As Schlesinger observes, 2 years later no one could properly any longer confuse the adversaries; Kennedy in office had proved his right to the margin of support the electorate ultimately awarded to his successor.

Schlesinger's vignettes serve the New Frontiersmen well, especially Averell Harriman, whose wise and selfless engagement merited the unstinted admiration it receives. Some 30 years the senior of most of his colleagues, Harriman nonetheless shared their ebullient youth. Adlai Stevenson, as Schlesinger portrays him, was less at home in Kennedy's Washington, but the picture of Stevenson that emerges captures his spirit, even though Schlesinger ruefully admits the continual uneasiness of Stevenson's relationship with Kennedy. A lesser President might have failed to enlist Stevenson in the common cause which the older man had defined and clarified while the younger was preparing himself for the responsibilities of power. Those who, as Schlesinger describes them, perhaps best represented the essential qualities of Kennedy's use of power, his preferred processes of government, and his goals for the United States were the trenchant, systematic, indefatigable McNamara, and the tough, steady Attorney General—hungry to learn, more and more the most effective and reliable liberal in the Cabinet.

Others fare less well. Lyndon Johnson, for one, whose strength Schlesinger gladly recognizes, appears, as he was, at some remove from the center of affairs—restless, egocentric, but an impressively loyal soldier to an army he had only reluctantly joined. In Los Angeles in 1960, Schlesinger writes, after Kennedy had won the nomination, Johnson was "far from Isaiah," and for the heathen Schlesinger adds, in a footnote other historians will envy, " 'come now, and let us reason together.' Isaiah 1:18. L.B.J. passim." But Johnson is the object only of respectful fun, while Dean Rusk is the object of exasperated disappointment.

The American [illegible] (the subject of a puckish [illegible] that pays special respect to Rich[illegible]) has questioned Schlesinger's taste, even his patriotism, for reporting Kennedy's private statement that Rusk would be permitted to resign. In the full context of Schlesinger's book, that report is neither tasteless nor unpatriotic nor undeserved. Schlesinger devotes a major portion of his total narrative and analysis to examining the inertia of the State Department, the Joint Chiefs, and the CIA, and to explaining Kennedy's efforts to break through the depressing influences of those agencies. The crisis for the President arose with the Bay of Pigs, an episode that Schlesinger makes a kind of fulcrum for his own critique of government as Kennedy inherited it. The implications of the story Schlesinger tells are as disturbing now as they must have been to the President at the time. State, CIA, and the Joint Chiefs displayed an invincible inability to question the premises from which the original planning of the operation had proceeded. In a series of small decisions built upon those rigid premises, a series that became irreversible in its momentum (in precisely the manner discussed by D. Braybrooke and C. E. Lindblom in "A Strategy of Decision)," they led the new administration to the calamity of the invasion. That affair, shattering the gay confidence of the spring of 1961, opened a long season of gloom that spread with the troubles in Berlin, Laos, and Africa. But the travesty of the Bay of Pigs had reminded Kennedy that specialists in intelligence and weaponry and protocol were attached to the particular interests they represented and, with singular exceptions, were incapable of comprehending or of representing the general interests of the Presidency or the United States. Accordingly, Kennedy turned increasingly to generalists in whom he had personal confidence, men charged with the dual duty of prodding the bureaucracies to perform at a high level of energy and imagination, and of transcending the advice of bureaucratic expertise. As the White House took over the strings of policy Kennedy gained the initiative and scope necessary for his later achievements, especially for his superb resolution of the second Cuban crisis and for his delicate diplomacy for the test ban. But Rusk, apparently by his own choice, ordinarily stood apart from involvement in those and other major issues, and Rusk only hesitatingly, if at all, endeavored to purge his Department of its sluggishness, parochialism, and banality. Thus Kennedy's statement about Rusk's resignation, and thus Schlesinger's report.

After the Bay of Pigs, Kennedy's largest difficulties in foreign policy, as Schlesinger sees it, derived not from American weakness or fumbling but from the strength and will of adversaries or off-and-on friends, particularly the Soviet Union and France. The accounts of Kennedy's trials with Khrushchev and De Gaulle profit alike from Schlesinger's care with details and his prefatory excursions into the backgrounds of Russian and French policy. Here and elsewhere in the book—for example, in sections on Latin America, Africa, Italy, and Great Britain—the author's grasp of the past enhances his rendering of the immediate. His candor, moreover, exposes certain failures of the administration which he views more generously than will some of his readers—for one, the lapse in communication with and consideration for an ally that intensified British disappointment over the cancellation of Skybolt; for another, the preoccupations that kept Kennedy from reversing the flow of decisions about Vietnam, decisions that originated in large part with various New Frontiersmen. Though no apologist for Diem, Schlesinger suggests in the infractable case of Vietnam how crippling were the limits of Kennedy's available choices. In that and other cases, Schlesinger tends to applaud the practicable and meliorative, and tends to deplore the radical and millennial. Here he reflects the tough but creative mood of the New Frontier. Yet that mood leaves, perhaps, too little room, not for agreement with, but for sympathy for those theorists who help to preserve a millennial vision against which the impact of the practicable can be measured. And Schlesinger, without being necessarily wrong, is nevertheless harsh in his asides about H. Stuart Hughes and those of like mind.

Schlesinger's more gentle but still critical treatment of the radicals in the civil rights movement appreciates their success in advancing their cause. At the same time, the Kennedys and their associates lent considerable thrust to that accelerating movement, and the Attorney General, in Schlesinger's assessment, receives the credit that his detractors have refused to grant him. Still, some of Robert Kennedy's admirers, including Schlesinger, for their part have not discussed the significance of the New Frontier's judicial appointments with the skeptical detachment of Alexander Bickel in his "Politics and the Warren Court." Overall, however, Schlesinger's approach to civil rights and other domestic issues is distinguished by its clarity and balance. Indeed, his discussion of economic policy provides a model for any general exploration of technical questions. Most important, with marked restraint Schlesinger shows conclusively that Kennedy did get the country moving again. The accomplishments of Lyndon Johnson rose from the strong foundations Kennedy built, for Kennedy's celebrated style was no trick of public relations but the graceful expression of a powerful mind, a powerful person, and a powerful program, admirably timed.

"Is there some principle of nature," Richard Hofstadter asked in a question Schlesinger quotes, "which requires that we never know the quality of what we have had until it is gone?" Perhaps. Those close to Kennedy knew before that dreadful day in Dallas. Many others did not. It is the special triumph of Schlesinger's book that those who read it, now or years from now, will know the quality of Kennedy. They should then conclude, with Schlesinger, that above all Kennedy "gave the world for an imperishable moment the vision of a leader who greatly understood the terror and the hope, the diversity and the possibility, of life on this planet and who made people look beyond nation and race to the future of humanity." In a sense, then, it did not come to an end in the cold.